

2019 | By: Emily Reno, Research Assistant



## Marketing and Outreach Analysis for Selling Diverse and Sustainably Grown Vegetable Seed in Minnesota

Northwest Regional Sustainable  
Development Partnership

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The Northwest Regional Sustainable Development Partnership brings together local talent and resources with University of Minnesota knowledge to drive sustainability in agriculture and food systems, tourism and resilient communities, natural resources and clean energy. The Partnerships are part of University of Minnesota Extension.

North Circle Seeds is committed to creating an ecologically diverse, equitable, and inclusive food system. We do this through an intentional relationship with our seeds and our circle of Midwestern growers, who produce regionally adapted seed using chemical-free, sustainable and organic practices.

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# Executive Summary

The following pages use the results from a survey conducted of farmers, gardeners, and seed purchasers of all types in the Upper Midwest to provide recommendations for a marketing plan for North Circle Seeds. North Circle Seeds is... Over the course of four weeks we conducted survey outreach through primarily online platforms and received 634 responses. The primary demographic reached was Caucasian (79%) women (78%) between the ages of 35 and 64 (25%). Based on the survey results and the outreach process, it became clear that online methods of communication and marketing alone are severely limited in reaching a diverse demographic, which is critical to achieve the seed collective's mission. Moving forward, North Circle Seeds will need to ensure absolute transparency due to the historical nature of seed saving and the cultural sensitivity that comes along with it. In approaching growers to join the collective, NCS must be clear about the intent of the company, how the profits are being used, and who ultimately benefits.

# Glossary of terms & acronyms

**BIPOC (Black, indigenous, people of color):** This term is often times used interchangeably with other terms describing historically marginalized communities, groups of people from which their land and bodies have been used as the basis for establishing wealth among White-skinned individuals.

**Diverse:** This term is used periodically throughout this report to refer to a demographic status that does not include Caucasians.

**Farmer:** Refers to any person who identifies as a farmer. We did not define this term in our survey, but allowed participants to self identify.

**Gardener/grower for personal consumption:** Refers to anyone growing vegetables at their home or on land that is used to feed themselves, their family, their community, etc.

**Seed seller:** This is anyone who is selling seeds. For the purposes of our survey, a seed seller would include a garden store or hardware store, for instance.

**Seed breeder:** This refers to someone who is growing produce for seed to sell.

**Nonprofit or community organization:** We decided to classify a nonprofit and community organization together for the purposes of our survey to make it easier to interpret the data. We assumed that a nonprofit or community organization would have different objectives and end users for their vegetables.

**NCS:** North Circle Seeds. Refers to the community partner involved in this project.

**GRA:** Graduate research assistant. Refers to Emily Reno, the author of this report.

**Collective:** North Circle Seeds is a collective, which means that farmers work together to grow seeds of different varieties to contribute to the company's stock. Each contract is based on the grower's individual circumstances and created with the grower to ensure that prices can be negotiated each year based off fair market prices, and the growers share the profits.

**Regionally adapted:** This refers to a quality of the seeds. For the purpose of this report, regionally adapted seed refers to seed that was grown in the upper midwest climate, and therefore is more likely to do well in the short growing season and cooler temperatures.

**Organic:** This term refers to a set of growing practices that does not use potentially harmful chemicals (for the plants and humans). North Circle seeds aims to breed, select, and sell organically bred seeds for certified organic or non-chemical (sustainable) farmers to collectively develop a seed supply that 'holds up' to organic systems in our region. These seeds are hardier and will withstand the pressures of disease and pest damage way better than seeds produced in conventional systems that use chemicals as part of the breeding.

# Project overview

North Circle Seeds is a new seed company in Minnesota. North Circle Seeds is committed to creating an ecologically diverse, equitable food system. They do this through an intentional relationship with their seeds and circle of Midwestern growers, who produce regionally adapted sustainably grown seed. The purpose of the collective is to increase access to locally adapted, organically and sustainably produced diversified vegetable seeds, with the goal of providing a financially viable outlet for Minnesota's growers. The University of Minnesota assisted in this endeavor by providing technical assistance from a graduate student to aid in market research and analysis for Minnesota growers and gardeners.

## Methodology

To achieve this objective, we developed a survey that we distributed electronically from July 7th-August 10th, 2019 using Qualtrics. See Appendix A for a copy of the questions and the results. Our outreach methods began with personal networks that we had virtual access to, then grew wider through snowball sampling. Various phases of outreach included list serves, online forums, all of the contacts listed in the Minnesota grown directory, emails and direct Facebook messages to all of the food cooperatives in Minnesota that did not have a website listed online, other food-based organizations across the state. Over the course of the summer we compiled a networks list of 105 contacts, not including the 1828 contacts our survey announcements went out to through Mailchimp. We reached 40.8K through two Facebook posts that we paid to have 'boosted' and through shares and mentions, and gained 199 new followers. North Circle Seeds' website received 757 visitors and the podcast episodes have been downloaded 20 times.

At the beginning of this project the North Circle Seeds website, podcast, and blog went live for the first time and the Facebook page had its first posts. We also used Mailchimp to send out notifications about our survey. The table below summarizes a few of the key metrics of our reach as well as their cost.

Table 1. Summary of outreach costs per platform				
Platform	Metric	Value	Cost	Cost per metric
Website	Number of sessions (period of continuous activity from a visitor)	757	Zach put in a collective 400+ hours into the website for adding seed products, info, blogs, events, seed podcasts and more	.53 hours per session (roughly thirty minutes)
Facebook Page	Likes	188	10+ hours writing	3 minutes (.05

			posts	hours) per like
	Followers	199	10+ hours	3 minutes (.05 hours) per like
	Survey post shares, mentions	5 shares, 4 mentions  Reach by organization:  Minnesota Food Charter: 10,448 followers  St. Peter Food Coop & Deli: 7,245 followers  Sustainable Farming Association: 4,773 followers  Lincoln Park Farmers Market: 507 followers  Hillside Farmers Market: 345 followers  <b>Total reach through shares and mentions: 23,318</b>	10+ hours	1.54 seconds (.0004 hours) per share/mention
Mailchimp	Newsletter subscribers  (typing up contacts from Minnesota Grown directory, importing contacts from emails, creating mailchimp messages to send out)	1828	40 hours x \$19.76 per hour = \$790.40	\$0.43

## Online marketing insights

There was a considerable learning curve for both NCS and the GRA to learn how to navigate Shopify for this project. The following information provides a high-level overview of the traffic that our survey was able to produce. We were intentional about creating a website on the page that had the survey link instead of just sharing the link so that people would visit the website and perhaps take the time to browse the products, farmer bios, podcast, and blog



posts. We continued to add more content over the course of the summer, including information about North Circle Seed's growers, products and product descriptions, and more recently, a frequently asked questions page. The website will continue to evolve as NCS streamlines its processes for developing online content.

## Website

The following table summarizes the number of 'online store sessions', or visits to the North Circle Seeds website, based on the device that was used to access the page.

Table 2. Online store sessions by device type	
Desktop	520
Mobile	221
Tablet	14
Unknown	3

## Facebook page & post insights


The following table summarizes where people were coming from when they went to North Circle Seeds' website. It is reasonable to expect that Facebook would be the highest source of traffic based off of the money spent to boost our Facebook posts, which linked directly to the website.

Table 3. Top sources of traffic	
1	Facebook
2	Qualtrics
3	Google
4	mymail1.myregisteredsite.com
5	sfa-mn.org

## Post Data

North Circle Seeds currently has 9 posts total. 2 of these directly related to survey, and both were boosted. The second post was shorter in content and also the post that we asked others to share to their organization's own pages and timelines once the survey promotion was in full swing. Table 4 below summarizes the metrics that are directly related to both Facebook posts. Based off of this information, while the length of the first post was greater and the cost per click larger, it had more reach than the second post, which was shorter in content and cost a little more than 50% less per click.

Table 4. Detailed post insights   Post 1	
Content	<div>Did you know? Just 3 global companies now own over 65% of the world's agricultural plant genetic resources (State of Organic Seed Report 2016). Scary, right? We think so too. That's why we're committed to providing seed that is regionally adapted to the Upper Midwest climate using chemical-free, organic practices. But we can't do this without you! This week we're excited to announce the launch of our customer survey to learn how we can support growers and seed purchasers in the Upper Midwest. We'll be collecting responses from now until August 9th. The best part? All participants will receive three seed packets for free and be entered to win a drawing for a t-shirt! Take our survey now and spread the word! <a href="https://umn.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_blpXv90g">https://umn.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_blpXv90g</a></div>
Reach	10.8K
Boost cost	\$39.43
Link clicks	110
Cost per click	\$0.36
Demographics	36.1% women 63.9% men
Other notes	This was the first post that went out before a lot of promotion started occurring
Detailed post insights   Post 2	

Content	 <p>Your voice matters! Take our survey today and receive a code for 3 free seed packets!  <a href="https://umn.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_blpXv90g">https://umn.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_blpXv90g</a></p>
Reach	6.7K
Boost cost	\$38.20
Link clicks	258
Cost per click	\$0.15
Demographics	<p>88.9% women</p> <p>11.1% men</p>
Other notes	This was the post we pinned to the top of the page and asked people to share once our survey promotion got going

## Incentives

To encourage survey participation, we offered two incentives to participants:

- Enter into a drawing for a North Circle Seeds t-shirt (10 will be given away)
- Three seed packets for free once seeds are available

Table five below illustrates how we calculated the cost per participant based on the cost of the incentives alone.

Table 5. Incentive costs		
Incentive	Expense	Cost per participant
North Circle Seeds t-shirts	\$851.75	\$1.3
Seed packets	\$4 per packet x 3 x 634 participants = \$7,608	\$15.00

Total incentive cost	\$7,608	\$16.30
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Knowing this information is helpful to compare to other services for which you can pay for survey responses. Other options include Amazon Turk, SurveyMonkey, and Qualtrics. A quick comparison below reveals that professional services may be more cost effective as a means of conducting market research. However, this does not take into account the direct marketing that occurs through promotion of the survey. As a result of this project, we reached up to 634 potential customers (the total number of responses we had by the time the survey closed).

**SurveyMonkey Audience:** 600 responses for a survey up to 27 questions: \$2550 = \$4.25

**Qualtrics:** We were not able to get a response to our quote request in time for the publication of this report, but from the initial conversation, it seemed as though this would cost at least \$5000.

**Amazon Mechanical Turk:** Requires creating an account to get an estimate

## Mailchimp Insights

We sent six campaigns total through Mailchimp, which is a service for email marketing. The average open rate was around 30%. The initial contact list came from North Circle Seed's personal contact list, which was just over 1,000 email addresses. The remaining 800 contacts came mostly from the Minnesota Grown directory. Table 6 below outlines specific metrics for our mailchimp campaigns. Based off of this information, the three most successful campaigns in order of the highest number of 'clicks' was Campaign 1, then the first and second survey reminders.

Table 6. Detailed Campaign Insights	
Campaign 1: New Minnesota-grown seed company seeks input from growers	
Date sent	Friday, July 12th, 2:50 p.m.
Audience	1,001, Zach's personal contacts
Opens/Open rate	353/33.9%
Clicks	65
Bounced	31
Unsubscribed	8

Successful deliveries	1040 (97.1%)
Forwarded	0
Campaign 2: New minnesota-grown seed company seeks input from growers	
Date sent	Tuesday, July 16th, 4:19 p.m.
Audience	9, SFA chapter leaders
Opens/Open rate	3/37.5%
Clicks	1
Bounced	1
Unsubscribed	0
Successful deliveries (percent)	88.9%
Forwarded	0
Campaign 3: Survey reminder #1	
Date sent	Thursday, July 25th, 3:06 p.m.
Audience	1052
Opens/Open rate	263/27.6%
Clicks	57
Bounced	11
Unsubscribed	4
Successful deliveries (percent)	1041 (99.0%)
Forwarded	0

Campaign 4: New Minnesota-grown seed company seeks input from growers	
Date sent	Monday, July 29th, 2:38 p.m.
Audience	226 First round of Minnesota Grown Contacts
Opens	93/43.7%
Clicks	23
Bounced	13
Unsubscribed	1
Successful deliveries (percent)	213 (94.2%)
Forwarded	0
Campaign 5: MN Grown Round 2	
Date sent	Friday, August 2nd, 2:33 p.m.
Audience	594 Second round MN Grown contacts
Opens/open rate	251/43.1%
Clicks	43
Bounced	12
Unsubscribed	2
Successful deliveries (percent)	582 (98.0%)
Forwarded	0
Campaign 6: Survey reminder #2	

Date sent	Friday, August 2nd, 2:54 p.m.
Audience	Everyone on the subscriber list minus those tagged second round MN Grown
Opens/Open Rate	311 (25.0%)
Clicks	41
Bounced	17
Unsubscribed	10
Successful deliveries	1246 (98.7%)
Forwarded	0
Campaign Analytics Summary (of all six campaigns)	
Average open rate	35.13%
Average clicks	38.33
Average bounced	14.17
Average unsubscribed	4.17
Average successful deliveries (percent)	84.25
Average forwarded	0

#### *Additional mailchimp analytics:*

You can filter the contacts on your subscribers lists by the activities they took when you sent the email out. For example, you can filter by 'Sent to', 'Opened', 'Didn't open', 'Clicked', 'Bounced', 'Unsubscribed', and 'Complained'. To get to this, go to Reports and then hovering over the Activity drop down menu.

## Limitations of survey outreach

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This process revealed the lack of cultural competency of the researcher and the community partner with regard to understanding how to reach a diverse audience through different communications methods. Initial conversations revolved around whether we should attend events in person to gather survey data versus a primarily online distribution method. Due to the limit of travel funding to support in-person event attendance, we figured our return on investment of time would be best spent by using email. However, the demographic reached was very narrow, which does not accurately represent the diversity of the customer base the collective aims to reach. One option we discussed was dividing the survey into two parts, where we would utilize online methods of distribution over the summer, and then conduct in-person outreach in the fall. Ideas for different populations that we could focus on in the fall included: Schools, older adults (such as retirees, senior centers), farmers markets, and farming workshops advertised through online forums. Major obstacles that prevented us from reaching a wider demographic included: language barrier, internet access of communities that grow, lacking the social capital among networks of diverse growers to spread the word, not being a part of informal networks of information exchange, and a long delay in translation for our survey from English to Somali and Hmong.

## Key findings from survey distribution

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- While online methods for survey distribution are effective, they are extremely limited in the demographic that they reach
- In comparison to paid services that provide survey responses for a targeted demographic, the cost per participant for this project was at least three times as high as what you might get through Amazon Mechanical Turk, Qualtric XM, or SurveyMonkey Audience.
- This project revealed additional, unanticipated costs of maintaining an online business, which will be helpful for North Circle Seeds to estimate long-term overhead and operating expenses. For example, once the number of subscribers for Mailchimp exceed 2000, you must upgrade to a paid plan. Additionally, Shopify prohibits vendors from selling hemp seeds unless they use a third party provider. Other operating costs that this survey revealed included the labor associated with developing a website, setting up the web hosting platform for a podcast, and the ongoing expense associated with maintaining a Facebook page and blog.

## Marketing plan recommendations

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The following recommendations provide a basic framework from which North Circle Seeds can begin to detail its customers and methods for meeting the demand for vegetable seeds. The categories and category descriptions came from Dave Lavinsky's article *Marketing Plan Template: Exactly what to include*, featured in Forbes magazine<sup>1</sup>. The marketing plan recommendations stem from the survey results and the GRA's marketing experience in other professional positions.

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<sup>1</sup> Lavinsky, Dave. (2013). *Forbes Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davelavinsky/2013/09/30/marketing-plan-template-exactly-what-to-include/#6ff409683503>



It should be noted that at this time, North Circle Seeds has not defined in any great detail its target customer. This provides both an opportunity and a challenge, but at least with the survey, North Circle Seeds now knows which demographic can be easily reached through e-marketing. That being said, the this demographic may not represent the collective's target. As the collective enters its first year of business, it may need to adjust expectations of who they will sell to based on the ease of reaching customers online, or shift the marketing plan and accompanying strategies to reach a wider target audience than what can be achieved through online means alone. This will necessarily add additional labor expenses.

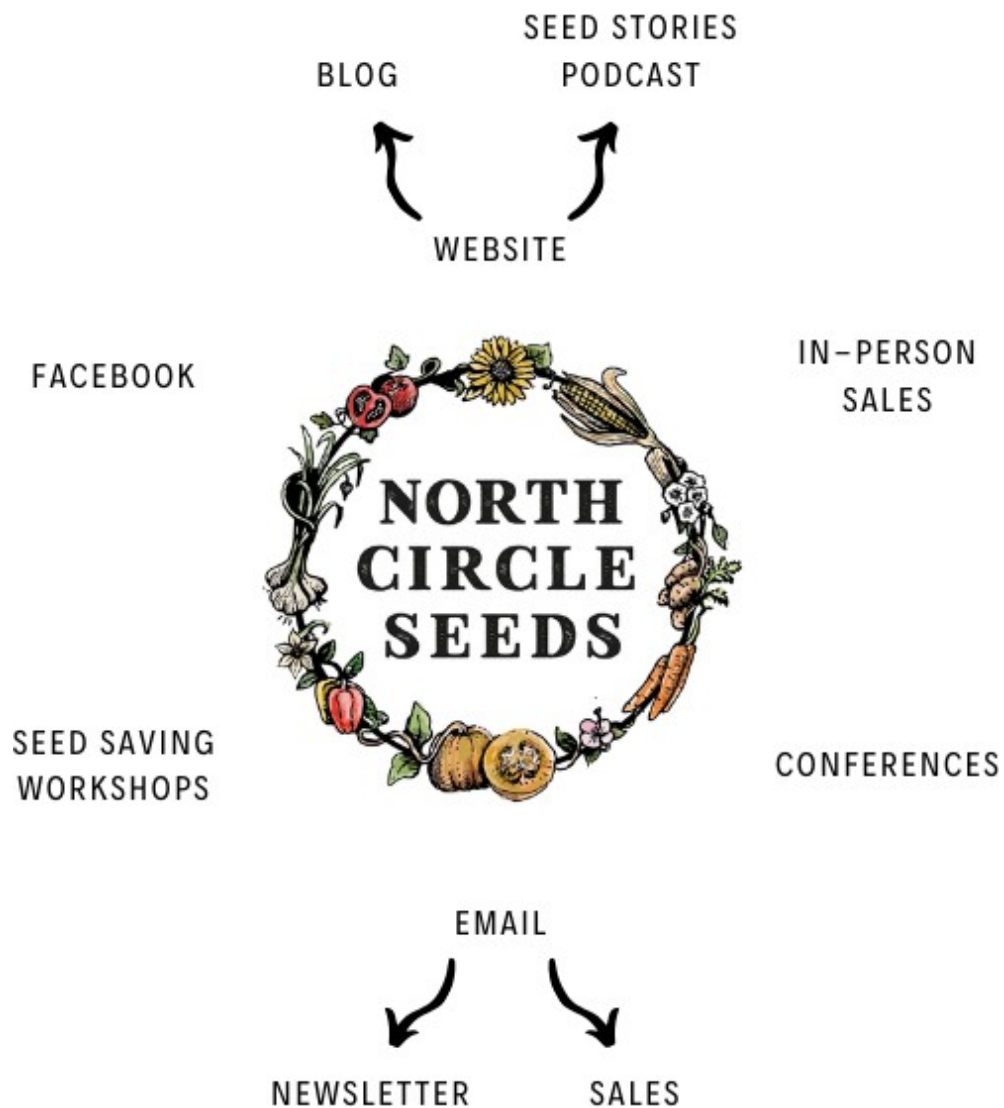
## Marketing plan components

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# Customer Interface

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# Target Customers

The following information provides a summary of the target customers using data from the survey results (each of the questions can be found in Appendix A) but does not break it down by demographic (i.e. customer segmentation), which will be more useful as North Circle Seeds refines its marketing strategies.

Table 7. Selected results from survey to describe target customer	
Type of grower	Gardener/growing for personal or community consumption (62.5%)
Spending habits	Between \$0 and \$50 on vegetable seeds
Growing history	Farming or gardening for over 20 years
Top 3 annual vegetable crops they are purchasing seed for	Tomatoes, beans, peppers
Certified organic	No (about 90%)*
Terminology preferences (most resonating, 1; least resonating, 5)**	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sustainable</li> <li>2. Regenerative</li> <li>3. Organic</li> <li>4. Non-chemical</li> <li>5. Non-GMO</li> </ol>
Top 3 platforms for finding information about farming and/or gardening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet searches (23.87%)</li> <li>• Seed companies (18.68%)</li> <li>• Social media (17.93%)</li> </ul>
Top 5 written in responses	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Fellow farmers/growers/experts/mentors/colleagues</li> <li>2. Extension/UMN/Master Gardeners</li> <li>3. Friends &amp; Family</li> <li>4. Field days/courses/workshops/classes/seminars</li> <li>5. Conferences</li> </ol>
Top 5 source of seeds	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Saving my own seeds (18.79%)</li> <li>2. Other (15.7%)</li> <li>3. Seed Savers Exchange (12.22%)</li> <li>4. Johnny's (11.24%)</li> <li>5. Seed exchanges (10.05%)</li> </ol>

Top 5 written in responses for Other (source of seeds)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Local hardware store/greenhouse/nursery/coop (54 mentions)</li> <li>2. Jung (16 mentions)</li> <li>3. Territorial (13 mentions)</li> <li>4. Jordan Seeds (12 mentions)</li> <li>5. Ebay/Amazon/Walmart/Local box store (11 mentions)</li> </ol>
Method for making final purchase order	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Website (66.09%)</li> <li>2. Catalog (18.14%)</li> <li>3. I do not buy from a seed company (12.53%)</li> <li>4. Phone (3.24%)</li> </ol>
Importance of receiving a print catalog in the mail	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Important (39.09%)</li> <li>2. Somewhat important (38.88%)</li> <li>3. Not important (22.03%)</li> </ol>
Top themes for the certified organic varieties or traits for which respondents have a difficult time finding	<p>Crop qualities (of 30 comments):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Certified organic (one person listed at Johnny's specifically) (12 mentions)</li> <li>2. Short lifecycle/cold hardy (10 mentions)</li> </ol> <p>Disease resistance (of 7 comments):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Downy/powdery mildew (3 mentions)</li> </ol> <p>Specific varieties (of 57 comments):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Tomato (7 mentions)</li> <li>2. Cabbage (4 mentions)</li> <li>3. Squash (4 mentions)</li> <li>4. Broccoli (4 mentions)</li> <li>5. Beets (3 mentions)</li> </ol>
Importance of specific qualities of seeds purchased (ranked in order from 1 (most important, 5 least important)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Flavor</li> <li>2. Nutrition</li> <li>3. High yielding</li> <li>4. Disease resistance</li> <li>5. Germination reliability</li> </ol>
What respondent want to learn about most (where 1 = most interested, 6 = least interested)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Seed Saving 101</li> <li>2. Hand pollination</li> <li>3. Seed cleaning and processing</li> <li>4. Plant breeding basics</li> <li>5. Seed-borne disease management and testing</li> <li>6. Biennial seed crop production</li> </ol>
Most repeated themes for what respondents are looking for in a regionally based seed collective and how they would like to participate (not in order of how many	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Cold hardiness/regionally adapted varieties</li> </ol>

mentions)***	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Education/workshops (what is a seed collective, seed saving)</li> <li>3. Partnering by conducting seed trials/using test plots/seed and knowledge sharing</li> <li>4. Supporting the collective by purchasing the products</li> </ol>
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\*While one could speculate that farmers might have a higher rate of organic certification than those who identified as gardeners, 85% of the 151 respondents who self-identified as a farmer are not certified organic.

\*\*Given the likelihood that participants would not be certified organic, we wanted to know what sustainability-like terms resonated with seed purchasers. This question only appeared for participants who selected 'No' when asked if they were certified organic.

\*\*\*Due to time constraints, coding this set of qualitative information remains

## Unique Selling Proposition

Your selling proposition distinguishes you from your competitors. The table below was created by conducting secondary market research (i.e. reviewing the websites of other seed companies) and determining how North Circle Seeds can 'stand out of the crowd'.

Table 8. Characteristics that distinguish NCS from competitors	
Competitor Characteristics	The North Circle Seeds Advantage
Money-back guarantee	Double guarantee: Replace the product and refund the price of any product a customer is not 100% satisfied with
Seed catalog (print and online)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer the catalog online as an e-book and as a downloadable pdf for quick skimming/scrolling</li> <li>• Stand out with eye-catching, beautiful photography</li> <li>• Keep it clean</li> <li>• Add character to the website by working with a local artist to create unique profiles of your growers</li> </ul>
Seed collections and mixes	Market these items as gift collections

Search bar	Using filters (annual, perennial, edible--if you did flowers, for example, organic--if you're going to do both organic and non-organic; region in the world that the seed is from/culture--you could have seed collections that include things that are specifically used in Hmong, Somali, Mexican cooking, for example)
Product descriptions	Discussing the varieties in a way that is more respectful to the culture/place/people that the seeds came from
Vegetable seeds	Culturally diverse, regionally adapted, grown under organic/sustainable conditions
Branding	Having a quirky/youthful brand through language, the podcast, and video footage

## Pricing and Position Strategy

North Circle Seeds is in an excellent position to charge a premium for their product based on the demand for regionally adapted, organic seeds in the upper midwest. There are no Minnesota-based companies that offer this, and those in the upper midwest that do exist do not emphasize the importance of the seed story or the cultural context. North Circle Seeds will be able to charge a higher price for their seeds than those that could be purchased at a big box store because of the specific seed qualities (regionally adapted, grown under chemical-free and/or organic conditions) and the social mission of supporting Minnesota's farmers financially. Communicating this message to customers is key to selling vegetable seeds at a higher price.

## Distribution Plan

Due to the organizational structure of North Circle Seeds, it may make more sense for the growers to focus first on online sales before entering retail or on-farm sales channels. 66 percent of survey respondents indicated that they end up making the final purchase of seeds through a website, with only 18 percent using a catalog. That being said, if the collective decides to enter markets of more informal networks (which may or may not have access to reliable internet), they may need to consider alternative methods for taking orders. Further market research could help determine if investing the time in alternative methods would reduce the barriers to access. For example, one survey respondent noted that technically EBT (food stamps) can be used to purchase seeds, but the problem is that people either do not know this, or companies selling seeds do not have their payment systems set up to accept EBT dollars. Therefore, North Circle Seeds may need to investigate how they could reach these communities to let them know that they accept those federal dollars.

# Your offers

Special deals that North Circle Seeds might consider offering to secure more new customers and bring customers back are most likely to succeed between January and May, when survey participants indicated the time of year in which they typically purchase vegetable seeds.

Key questions that could help determine additional discounts and promotions include:

- How much money will a customer have to spend to receive free shipping?
- Will there be any sales during Cyber Monday?
- Do you offer gift cards or gift boxes/sets of seeds that can be purchased as gifts?
- Will there be special pricing for nonprofits or discounts if seeds are purchased in bulk?

Offers could include discounts on all seed orders for participants at the collective's seed saving workshops, money-back guarantees, and/or free shipping for orders over a specific amount (such as \$25 or \$30). Offers may help you grow your customer base at a faster rate than it would otherwise.

# Marketing Materials

Marketing materials are the collateral used to promote your business to current and prospective customers<sup>2</sup>, which could include your website, print brochures, business cards, and catalogs. Table 9 below outlines which marketing materials have been completed and which need created or revamped:

Table 9. Marketing Materials Assessment	
Business cards	Completed
Website	In progress
Podcast	Ongoing, in progress
Facebook page	Ongoing, in progress

<sup>2</sup> Lavinsky, Dave. (2013). *Forbes Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davelavinsky/2013/09/30/marketing-plan-template-exactly-what-to-include/#6ff409683503>

Online catalog	Ongoing, in progress
Educational brochure on seed saving	Completed
Educational videos/Vlog	Potential, not started
T-shirts	Printed, not listed on website
Additional social media platforms (Instagram, Twitter)	Potential, accounts not created
Seed packaging	Seed packet designs completed, bigger bulk seed packaging TBD (You may consider ways to make your packaging unique or thoughtful, such as orders including a sticker, NCS tape, etc.)

## Promotions Strategy

To reach new customers, North Circle Seeds can employ a variety of tactics. The most easily accessible for the collective at this time include press releases and event marketing. Reaching a diverse buyer demographic will require more than just using online methods to reach customers. Some strategies include:

- Press releases in local newspapers
- Features on other podcasts based in the upper midwest
- Features with food bloggers
  - Consider partnering with food bloggers who make recipes with your products to widen your audience and give customers a sense of what it's like to cook with foods grown from your seeds.

## Online Marketing Strategy

Like it or not, most customers go online these days to find and/or review new products and/or services to purchase. As such, having the right online marketing strategy can help you secure new customers and gain competitive advantage. The four key components to your online marketing strategy are as follows:

**Keyword Strategy:** Keywords that can be used on the website will be determined based on survey results. The most relevant will come from the question asking what people are looking for in a seed company, which sustainability terms they value most, and any of the 'other' responses where people wrote in their own comments. In this way, people's ideas about what they want will be reflected in the brand language of NCS.

**Search Engine Optimization Strategy:** Ways that you can improve your website to improve searchability include:

- Decreasing photo size online while maintaining high resolution



- Using google insights to identify additional website components that are slowing the loading time
- Optimizing images for both desktop and mobile usage (ensuring you have a diversity of both landscape and portrait photos to choose from)

**Paid Online Advertising Strategy:** Online advertising programs that could be used to reach target customers include:

- Facebook post boosting
- Google ads
- Pay-per-click
- Influencer marketing
- Banner ads
- Ad retargeting

**Social Media Strategy:** Social media marketing is one of the lowest cost forms of advertising. It is critical to have clarity about how North Circle Seeds intends on using the platform. Currently North Circle Seeds uses one social media platform, Facebook. Ways that this platform could be used to attract customers include:

- Sharing events of partners (to increase brand awareness)
- Sharing posts from food bloggers who use your products (to generate leads and sales)
- Offering discounts or offers to only Facebook followers (to generate leads and sales)
- Facilitating seed story discussion posts and polls (to build community)
- Creating a monthly series of posts related to seed saving tips (to create a positive opinion)
- Posting recipes that feature NCS veggies (to build community, create a positive opinion)

In general, it is recommended that when it comes to social media platforms you should focus on one platform at a time, get really good at it, and then add additional platforms as needed. It is important to ensure that the platform matches the type of content that you intend to produce. For example, if

communicating your message is achieved best through photography, it would make the most sense to pursue Instagram. If the target audience were more affiliated with a professional realm, LinkedIn might work well. For North Circle Seeds' purposes, I would recommend pursuing Instagram and Twitter as two additional platforms.

## OUR VALUES

We grow vegetable seeds with real flavor that thrive in the Northern Plains

## EDUCATION & COMMUNITY

We depend on growers like you to meet the demand for regionally adapted seed.

We believe sustainability begins with the seed

## OUR SEEDS

We believe access to seed saving knowledge is a basic human right.

## GROW FOR US

Additionally, to improve customer service satisfaction reviews, I recommend setting up automatic replies through email and FB, that way you do not have to worry about responding right away.

The image to the right is an example of how some of the comments from what survey participants are looking for in a seed collective could be integrated into the brand language:

## Conversion Strategy

Not everyone who visits your website will end up purchasing a product. Therefore, it is helpful to understand your customer and the best strategies that can help you convert these leads. Conversion strategies could be used in a couple of ways: for turning prospective customers into paying customers, and turning prospective growers into contracted growers. One strategy that was employed during the survey was offering free seed packets to participants. While this is not financially sustainable in the long-term, it served as a first step towards introducing customers to the product and may result in increased sales both this year and beyond.

Table 10: Conversion-boosting strategies	
Strategy	Description
Improving sales scripts	Having a clear message when discussing the advantages of NCS products with prospective customers while presenting/hosting events
Product reviews	Provide space for customers to provide product reviews on the individual pages
Content marketing <sup>3</sup>	This is the concept that you will provide information for your customers that is relevant and could help them provide answers to their growing problems. By providing relevant content, customers will go to you as a source of information in addition to purchasing your products.
Highlight testimonials from happy customers <sup>4</sup>	By putting quotes from satisfied customers front and center, visitors to the website will feel more confident

<sup>3</sup> "Top 10 Lead Conversion Strategies to Boost Your Business Success." *Devrix*. Retrieved from <https://devrix.com/tutorial/top-lead-conversion-strategies-boost-business-success/>

<sup>4</sup> "Top 10 Lead Conversion Strategies to Boost Your Business Success." *Devrix*. Retrieved from <https://devrix.com/tutorial/top-lead-conversion-strategies-boost-business-success/>

	that they are purchasing a reliable product
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## Joint Ventures and Partnerships

One of the biggest challenges that North Circle Seeds will face is matching the inventory to the demand for vegetable seeds. One way that the growers of the collective could ensure that they have enough of a specific variety and/or sell all of their product is by working directly with their customers to determine which vegetables they want to purchase see for. In this way, the end market will be established before anything is planted.

In addition to the networks list developed through the survey distribution, the following could serve as potential partners for hosting events (see Conversion Strategy):

- [Minnesota Statewide Extension Master Gardener Conference](#)
- [Minnesota Landscape Arboretum](#)
- [Minnesota Organic Conference](#)
- [Minnesota Statewide Extension Master Gardener Conference](#)
- [Minnesota State Horticultural Society Community Calendar](#)
- Homegrown Minneapolis
  - This summer they conducted a [Minneapolis Urban Ag Survey](#). Some of the results showed respondents expressing a need for seeds and education. This could present an opportunity to collaborate. The best person to contact regarding the survey results is Claire Baglien, [Claire.Baglien@minneapolismn.gov](mailto:Claire.Baglien@minneapolismn.gov).

## Referral Strategy

A formalized referral strategy will help determine when you will ask customers for referrals, what (if anything) you will give them as a reward, etc<sup>5</sup>. Some considerations for the strategy could include ways to integrate the podcast listeners with the business by providing exclusive offers to listeners or access to materials they may not be available to non-subscribers.

## Strategy for increasing transaction prices

Transaction price is just as important as securing the sale. Ways to increase the transaction price could be by providing options for customers to purchase seed in bulk, such as to larger farmers or institutions that run multiple gardens/farms. For example, Open Arms provides meals to people for free in Minneapolis and they manage seven different urban farm sites across the Cities. Finding similar programs could prove fruitful for securing larger purchase orders. Another option might be to create seed mixes in which a handful of seed varieties are put together

<sup>5</sup> Lavinsky, Dave. (2013). *Forbes Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davelavinsky/2013/09/30/marketing-plan-template-exactly-what-to-include/#6ff409683503>

and marketed under a specific name. This could include a specialty herb or asian greens mix, or a ‘small spaces’ mix with bush varieties, indeterminant tomatoes, and other smaller vegetables.

## Retention strategy

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Retention strategies are used to get existing customers to buy more often. These could include a monthly newsletter and/or customer loyalty program. The newsletter should offer content that is not available elsewhere on the website to encourage subscribers. Some suggestions for content include updates on upcoming events, the inside scoop on new seeds, and guest features from the growers. Another option is a customer loyalty program, in which customers may earn rewards when they spend a specific amount of money online. Ways to make this of interest to customers may be by offering additional gifts or products that are not available elsewhere on the website. For example, perhaps customers could only have access to North Circle Seeds t-shirts if they become part of the rewards program. When thinking about the existing seed stories podcast, there are ways that you could turn Zeke Greenside (the podcast host) into a character in real life through outreach and engagement efforts. For example, what would a seed costume look like, and how could this make your brand more engaging for customers?

## Financial Projections

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For the purposes of this project, there was not enough time to create a full financial projection. These projections would include the promotional expenses you expect to incur and what your expected results will be in terms of new customers, sales and profits<sup>6</sup>. You would also include the expected results from the other strategies, and then use this to identify which will give you the highest return on investment. Creating financial projections can also aid in goal setting.

## Website layout and content recommendations

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### *Layout considerations*

- Tabs at top
  - MERCH
    - Could include t-shirts, buttons/stickers, canvas bags. This is probably not recommended until you are more established as a business and there is greater demand
  - RECIPES
    - Could crowd source this as well or pull together some of your favorite recipes
    - This could also be integrated into the individual product pages
  - RESOURCES
    - Educational content on seed saving, regionally adapted seed

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<sup>6</sup> Lavinsky, Dave. (2013). *Forbes Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davelavinsky/2013/09/30/marketing-plan-template-exactly-what-to-include/#6ff409683503>

- Be sure that customers understand the advantage of using regionally adapted seed
  - Depending on your long-term goals for scale, it might make sense to facilitate a seed-saving training or certificate, or work with others who could offer this for free. If this were something that the Collective organizes, you would want to be sure to avoid the peak buying season to prioritize customer service
  - Consider including things like book recommendations, links to other helpful websites (especially those that were listed as the ‘other’ sources of where survey participants get information about seeds)
- Chef and food preparer-specific information
  - If you’re thinking about selling to restaurants, or chefs who contract with growers, you could include a section on the individual seed page that includes “Chef notes” or “Food preparation tips”. You could also integrate some of this into your filters idea--like “Chef favorites” and include things that chefs have particularly enjoyed working with in the kitchen--I would steer people who are working in commercial kitchens towards hard neck vs. soft neck garlic, for instance, because the outer shell is typically faster to take off. Understanding from a food preparation perspective is really important for these things.
- CALENDAR
  - Integrating an events calendar into the website could be an easier way to keep track of workshops and other seed saving events that NCS wants to promote
- FAQ
  - One question that is not addressed here is how NCS defines the upper midwest, or the region in which the seeds are adapted. Having a map with a clear outline of the region in which the seeds will be successful will help buyers understand the significance of what it means to be regionally adapted. This is not currently on any other competitors’ websites, which could be advantageous.
- Links at bottom
  - Work with us
    - You could divide this into a couple of sections: ‘For growers’ and ‘for community organizations/nonprofits’ (i.e. food shelves, community gardens, etc.)
  - Shipping policy & guarantee

### *Producing high-quality content*

The following suggestions are for ways to create content that customers love:

- Take pictures as often as possible over the course of the growing season, any time you are at events
- Utilize different tools that I’ve created to streamline the process of taking raw photos and converting for easy online publication
  - Compression
  - Canva for easy sizing of FB banners
  - Photo tracker to know which photos have been compressed and specs on ideal image size & resolution
    - Rename these with unique ID to distinguish from original photos--keep these saved in separate folders for easy uploading to Shopify/FB
- Utilize Adobe suite and Canva for photo editing prior to resizing
  - Ensure that images are very high quality and look how you want them to before compressing
- Know what sells

- Do your own tests to determine which style of photos works best for selling particular products.
  - Ex. eyes and lips have been shown to increase click through rates
  - Consider different ways that you can present seeds that might differ yourself from competitors.
    - What's in the foreground/background?
    - Is it sliced on a cutting board?
    - Are there people in the image?
    - Color contrast between vegetable/seed and background
    - Creating shapes or words out of the seeds/fruit
    - Incorporating customers into this process--you might be able to crowdsource your photos by creating competitions where people submit their photos--you could give them something or promise that they get a watermark at the bottom of the photo. This could be a good way to get people engaged in your work and also have people buy your seeds.
  - Have a handful of websites/photos on hand that you can use for inspiration--look outside of just seed companies and to other food businesses for additional ideas
    - Illustrate to customers not just what the fruit or vegetable or seed looks like, but what they can do with it in the kitchen
      - This is where knowing your customer demographics comes into play...If you know that your primary customers are women between the ages of 30 and 50, you may think about where they are getting ideas for cooking and use similar marketing strategies to capture their attention or stretch their imagination in terms of what they are getting when they buy products from NCS.
      - Look to food magazines for inspiration
        - [Food & Wine Vegetables](#)
        - [Cooks Illustrated](#)
        - [Midwest Living](#)
- Don't be afraid to model your own website design off of others that you find inspiring. One example that I liked for organizing events is from [Barbell Bee Ranch](#).

## Workflow suggestions for curating content

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The following suggestions are to reduce the work required to find related articles, videos, podcasts, etc. that could be used in a monthly newsletter, blog post, or Facebook update.

- Subscribe to relevant newsletters from other companies/organizations and have them automatically diverted from your inbox into a separate folder. This allows you to skim through the content at your leisure and reduces your email inbox traffic. Two newsletters/list serves that would be good to subscribe to include:
  - UMN Fruit and Vegetable News
  - SUSTAG

## Moving Forward

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Based on the market research conducted this summer, the following additional activities would continue to add value to North Circle Seeds' marketing plan:

- Conduction additional market research
  - This could focus on different target audiences and competition
    - Chefs and foodmakers: What do they have a hard time getting regionally, year-round?
    - Seed companies in Canada: Prairie Flora, Heritage Harvest
      - The purpose of this would be to compare inventory and branding strategies for a colder climate
- Keep track of your metrics
  - A calculation that is missing from website components that will help in the future is the time associated with podcast production. Calculating the time that it takes to conduct interviews and edit the audio will determine the true cost of this component of the marketing plan and assist later on down the line the ROI based on traffic to the website, downloads, number of comments, etc.
  - One of the best ways to demonstrate the demand and success of the work that the Collective does is through data on its own activities. Easy ways to do this might be to create an excel sheet to keep track of attendance at events, website and newsletter analytics, etc. Ultimately these numbers may help in grant/funding applications in the future
  - Metrics are also integral to benchmarking. By collecting baseline data, you can assess your progress over time and see if you are reaching your goals.
- Get clear about your vision and how you will get there.
  - Make this known to your customers through the information available on your website, at in-person events, etc. and you will attract the ideal customers and growers
  - Consider using the [OKRs model](#) to define these internally

## Conclusion

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Ultimately, North Circle Seeds is in both a powerful and precarious position due to the cultural nuances of seed saving. As the Seed Collective moves forward in its work, there are components of its communication and outreach strategy that will require careful navigation to avoid gaining a poor reputation among the marginalized communities it aims to serve. For example, transparency about how the profits from the business are being used/who they support, why seeds are being sold at a profit to begin with, etc. Internally, the Seed Collective's White growers would benefit from undertaking professional development training and other means of achieving personal transformation to improve cultural competency and an understanding of how their actions (intended or not) impact disadvantaged communities, who their products serve, and how to elevate the voices of BIPOC communities.

## Appendix

For access to the slides for the survey, please contact the author of this report.

## Bibliography

Lavinsky, Dave. (2013). *Forbes Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davelavinsky/2013/09/30/marketing-plan-template-exactly-what-to-include/#6ff409683503>

<sup>1</sup> "Top 10 Lead Conversion Strategies to Boost Your Business Success." *Devrix*. Retrieved from <https://devrix.com/tutorial/top-lead-conversion-strategies-boost-business-success/>